

Learning Gender: An Exploration of Binary Gender Stereotypes in American High Schools

Capstone Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Master of Education Degree in the

College of Education and Human Service Professions

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June 2019

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## **Acknowledgements**

First, I must thank my family and friends for supporting me and sticking by my side throughout this entire project, I couldn't have done any of this without you. Secondly, I must thank all the students who I have spoken with and who have opened up their hearts and minds in order to make this project happen, your help has been immeasurable.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to anyone who has been told they don't belong because of who they are.

## **Abstract**

For LGBTQIA high school students, binary gender stereotypes can create social barriers that are difficult for LGBTQIA students to navigate through. This study explores the experiences five LGBTQIA university students had with binary gender stereotypes while they were in high school. Three themes were discovered from the data, firstly the participants developed an us versus them mentality to understand the binary gender stereotypes around them. Secondly, students who were publicly non-binary or did not fit into the stereotype for their binary gender were recognized as an “other” and often victimized and bullied. Lastly, male students were viewed as the most important gender because of their toughness and athleticism, female students were viewed as less valuable than their male peers but more valuable than non-binary or LGBTQIA students, and non-binary and LGBTQIA students were ultimately valued the least because of their gender. Consistent with previous studies, LGBTQIA students were found to have been victimized and bullied if they did not fit into the stereotype designated for their binary gender. LGBTQIA students who were bullied described their high schools as unwelcoming and ran the risk of skipping class and having a lower GPA in order to avoid further bullying. This study explores the implications of these findings and how future lawmakers and researchers can improve the climate of our high schools.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

*“Be okay with yourself, don't let others tell you what you are.”*

It should be no surprise that students frequently experience binary gender stereotypes in their schools, even while they are in kindergarten (Stroeher, 1994; Servos, Dewar, Bosacki, & Coplan, 2016). What is shocking, is that a 2017 survey by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) found that in the United States almost fifty percent of the 23,001 LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual, and ally) students surveyed felt they were unsafe in their school because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2018). Further studies regarding binary gender stereotype use in educational settings have found that the experiences LGBTQIA students have with these stereotypes can negatively affect students' academic success and mental health (Prairie, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2018; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). In light of this research, this study explored the experiences five LGBTQIA university students had with binary gender stereotypes while they were in high school.

In the following pages, I discuss the background of this study including the significant influence that binary gender stereotypes have on high school students, as well as the definition of binary gender stereotypes that will be used for the remainder of the study. Next, I discuss the purpose of this study which is to understand how LGBTQIA university students experienced binary gender stereotypes in high school. Afterwards, my personal role as the researcher is discussed and describes how my personal experiences as a high school student and my desire for teaching assisted in the creation of this study. Finally, at the end of this chapter, the limitations and assumptions are discussed and include the binary genders that are the main focus of the

study (male and female) and explain why other non-binary genders or other stereotypes are not discussed in great detail in this study.

### **Background of the Study**

The study's focus was to understand how LGBTQIA university students experienced binary gender stereotypes in high school. This research is significant because it addresses a gap in educational research that considers the personal experiences many LGBTQIA students have with persistent social binary stereotypes. More specifically, the experiences of LGBTQIA students described will be those that occurred while they were high school students and faced binary gender stereotypes, either explicitly or implicitly. Persistent social binary gender stereotypes refer to the stereotypes that have been created and continually reused regarding the binary gender roles of male and females. Binary gender stereotypes only include the characteristics placed on the male or female genders; they exclude non-binary genders. An example of a such binary gender stereotypes is "men are stronger than women, therefore men are better athletes," which insinuates males are inherently stronger than females. It is these types of stereotypes that impact students' experiences, especially LGBTQIA students because they are frequently bullied and victimized because of their gender expression (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009). This study examined the experiences of LGBTQIA students and the socially persistent binary gender stereotypes they experienced in their high school years.

Previous studies conducted on the topic of binary gender stereotypes in an educational environment show that binary gender stereotypes can be mistakenly reinforced by teachers. Stevens and Martell (2016) and Baig (2014) researched how a teacher's personal beliefs toward



gender were portrayed through their teaching methods and mistakenly, projected onto their students. Additionally, Brickhouse, Lowery, and Schultz (2000) conducted multiple interviews with students and teachers in the science field to define the stereotype for a female in science. Research done by Brutsaert (1999) and Dee (2005) determined the influencing role gender identity had on students in relevance to their education, the teaching methods applied by teachers, and the teaching environment students and teachers participated in. From these studies, it is clear that there are multiple ways in which binary gender stereotypes are reinforced in an educational setting.

This study attempted to fill a gap in the literature and explored the experiences university students had with binary gender stereotypes while they were in high school. The study provides a personal and intimate viewpoint into the experiences of LGBTQIA university students and their views on binary gender stereotypes and the influences that binary gender stereotypes have on LGBTQIA students. Studies have shown that students who experience gender stereotypes in school can be influenced to choose a certain career or educational path, based on the gender stereotypes they experienced (Bieri Buschor, Kappler, Keck Frei, & Berweger, 2014). This study addressed a gap in research in regard to the little information about the influence binary gender stereotypes on high school students and their high school experience.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences university students had with binary gender stereotypes while they were in high school. This research is significant as there currently has been little research conducted regarding the personal experiences students have had with binary gender stereotypes during their high school years. This research is especially

important because it explores the influences that binary gender stereotypes can have on a student's overall high school experience. Numerous studies have shown that LGBTQIA students who choose to be "out" about their gender identity often fall victim to bullying. The bullying can occur in various forms such as social rejection and isolation from their peers, discrimination, and physical, verbal and sexual harassment from their classmates. LGBTQIA students who are bullied also experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Prairie, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2018). With these outcomes in mind, this study contributes significant data regarding the experiences LGBTQIA students have had while they were in high school.

Another reason why this study is valuable is because it also investigates the academic effects binary gender stereotypes can have on LGBTQIA students. Studies have shown that LGBTQIA students achieve less academically because of their weakened connection with their school, stemming from a school climate that can feel hostile, unwelcoming, or unsafe (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2018; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008). The discrimination of LGBTQIA students can lead many LGBTQIA students to skip school because they feel unsafe or unwelcomed (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2018). With some LGBTQIA students choosing to not attend school because of the hostility binary gender stereotypes promote, this study may offer insights into how LGBTQIA students navigate such hostilities and succeed. Finally, the research question that was asked for this study was: How did LGBTQIA university students experience binary gender stereotypes while they were in high school?

## **Setting**

The setting of the study was a regional university in the upper Midwest of the United States where there is support of LGBTQIA students who self-identify along the gender spectrum. The study involved five university students describing their experiences with the binary gender stereotypes that were present in the high schools they attended. The participants were interviewed in a study room in the university's library, providing the students a space where they could reflectively and retrospectively speak about the binary gender stereotypes they experienced when they were in high school. This study occurred during a time where socially, topics such as gender and sexuality were more commonly discussed in comparison to previous generations. This awareness and openness for young adults to discuss gender and sexuality also provided a setting in which this study could explore the experiences of students who self-identify as LGBTQIA or non-binary.

## **Role of the Researcher**

My personal interest in the continual use of binary gender stereotypes in today's world, as well as my experience with binary gender stereotypes as a student led, me to this study. As a former high school student in the 2000's in the upper midwestern United States, binary gender stereotypes were present in my classes that either created a positive or a negative environment for female or LGBTQIA students in the classroom. The common binary gender stereotypes that I experienced as a high school student were often labels that carried negative connotations regarding the gender role of females. As a student, I had to decide for myself how I was going to understand binary gender stereotypes that went against what I believed it meant to be male or

female. It is my personal experience that drove me to explore the topic of binary gender stereotypes as a researcher.

As an educator, I have found that it is crucial for me to understand the experiences a student has with binary gender stereotypes in their school, in order for me to grow and become a better teacher. Because of this desire for self-awareness and self-growth, I chose to use my past experiences as the pathway that I will follow to better understand how students experience binary gender stereotypes.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study examined LGBTQIA university students' experiences of binary gender stereotypes that occurred when they attended high school. While other stereotypes are not of less importance or frequency, the scope of this study was to uncover the experiences students had with how binary gender stereotypes while they attended high school.

An important assumption in this study is that a person's gender is not limited to the male-female gender binary. Rather, gender is, in actuality, fluid. A person's gender can change over time or it can be a non-binary gender, such as agender or third gender (Richards et al., 2016). This assumption is reflective of Butlers (1990) assertion that gender is "radically independent of sex" (p. 9), and not rigid such as current male-female gender stereotypes suggest. Additionally, it is important to note that for this study, a person's gender is not linked to their biological sex that is assigned at birth (Richards et al., 2016).

A second assumption present in this study is that people are capable of recollecting their experiences and can reflectively make sense of those experiences (Bauer, Hättenschwiler, & Larkina, 2016). This assumption is crucial to this study as the participants were asked to

retrospectively recall the experiences they had with binary gender stereotypes when they were high school students. With these two assumptions, gender is fluid (Richards et al., 2016) and students are able to recollect their memories to make meaning of them (Bauer, Hättenschwiler, & Larkina, 2016), this study is able to explore the experiences university students have had with the binary gender stereotypes present in their high school.

The first limitation for this study is that almost all of the participants were students from the same institution. Having a majority of the participants be students from the same institution could have potentially shaped their understanding of gender and binary gender stereotypes in similar way. However, it is important to note that all the participants had different high school experiences and may not have attended the same high school. A second limitation for this study is the number of students that participated. With a small number of students who choose to participate in this study, this could potentially limit the diversity and number of findings.

## **Summary**

To summarize, the purpose of this study was to investigate LGBTQIA university students' experiences with the binary gender stereotypes that were persistent when they attended high school. There have been numerous studies conducted that researched how binary gender stereotypes can be mistakenly reinforced through our teaching methods and language use (Brutsaert, 1999; Stevens & Martell, 2016). However, these studies do not explore the student's personal experiences with binary gender stereotypes during their time as a high school student. The setting of the study was at a university in the upper Midwest and asked university students to reflectively recollect their experiences with the binary gender stereotypes that they experienced in high school. From my personal experience as a former high school student, I found the

opportunity to create this study and to explore the experiences students have with binary gender stereotypes.

In the chapter that follows, I will review past research that examined the experiences of LGBTQIA students with binary gender stereotypes. The next chapter will also discuss relevant themes that were present in existing research. Such themes include biases of the teaching staff and the school's environment.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

Extensive investigation has been conducted on students' development and understanding of binary gender, as well as the projection of binary gender stereotypes in educational settings. Current literature reveals several factors that contribute to binary gender stereotype use in an educational setting, two of the most predominant are: a student's understanding of gender and a school's environment. This literature review first addresses these themes and then, explains the relevance a student's understanding of gender and the school's environment has in the current study.

#### **LGBTQIA Students and the meaning of Gender**

While binary gender terms and stereotypes are frequently used to label individuals based on their sex assigned at birth, non-binaries such as Third Gender describe individuals who identify with an additional gender or a gender in between male and female. Non-binary genders terms are different than the binary male or female gendered terms as they are frequently used to label individuals who self-identify as being a gender other than male or female. Another non-binary such as agender refers to a person who identifies as having no gender (Richards et al, 2016). Similarly, Two-spirit is a cultural term used frequently among Cherokee tribes to describe someone whose gender exists outside of colonial logic and falls outside the binary male/female or is a mix of both (Driskill, 2016, p. 6). These non-binary definitions of gender, other than male and female, are important to this study as the research that was conducted centered around university students and their experiences with binary gender stereotypes during their high school

years. Based on the interviews, participants in the study made it clear that they understood gender beyond the conventional male-female binary.

For students, “the use of labels during identity development helps adolescents view different facets of themselves as part of a coherent whole” (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015, p. 169). Several studies regarding the experiences of LGBTQIA students have revealed that LGBTQIA students who choose to be “out” may benefit socially and academically from “coming out” about their gender identity, but LGBTQIA students also have a higher chance of experiencing victimization (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009). LGBTQIA students can benefit from “coming out” about their gender identity as coming out may heightening their self-esteem, improve of their psychological well-being and lower their risk of depression (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015).

**LGBTQIA Students and Bullying.** As stated earlier, students who choose to be “out” may become victimized, or bullied, by their peers. Victimization can result in social rejection and isolation from their peers, discrimination, and physical, verbal and sexual harassment from their classmates. Students who are bullied also can experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Prairie, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2018). In particular, LGBTQIA students have experienced discrimination in their schools because of the restricting school policies that prevented them from wearing clothing that was deemed “inappropriate” for their legal sex (ex: a boy wearing a dress), from using their chosen name or preferred gender pronoun, and were required to use a bathroom or locker room designated for their legal sex (Kosciw et al., 2018). LGBTQIA students also experienced verbal harassment in their school in the form of anti-LGBTQIA and homophobic remarks, such as



“faggot” or “that’s so gay.” Many LGBTQIA students explained that the homophobic language caused them to “feel bothered or distressed to some degree” (Kosciw et al., 2018, p.18).

Students who are bullied because of their gender can also experience negative academic outcomes such as lower GPAs, poor academic success and poor attendance (Kosciw et al., 2018; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008). Several studies have shown that LGBTQIA students achieve less academically due to a diminished connection with their school community stemming from a school climate that can feel hostile, unwelcoming, or unsafe (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2018; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008). Moreover, the discrimination of LGBTQIA students can lead many LGBTQIA students to skip school because they feel unsafe (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009). In fact, GLSEN’s 2017 survey for LGBTQIA students found that LGBTQIA students were almost three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than non-LGBTQIA students. Similarly, 33.9% of LGBTQIA students who participated in the survey stated that they were considering dropping out of school because of the hostile climate in their school (Kosciw et al., 2018).

To combat the negative consequences that LGBTQIA students experience because of the presence of binary gender stereotypes in their school, some school districts are implementing the addition of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs). GSAs are school organizations that are supportive of LGBTQIA students and provide LGBTQIA-inclusive resources (Kosciw et al., 2018). Studies have shown that GSAs can lower the rates of bullying, make students feel safer, and improve students’ mental health (Prairie, 2018; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008). LGBTQIA students have also attested that they had a greater sense of belonging to their school, there were a greater number of

supportive school staff, and their peers were more accepting when there was a GSA at their school (Kosciw et al., 2018).

### **Teaching Environment**

Similar to LGBTQIA student victimization, current research about a school's environment also provides numerous examples of how the teaching and learning environment of a classroom can influence how a student develops their own gender identity. Current studies by Bower-Phipps (2017) explored how inclusivity can positively influence the culture of the classroom and the individual. While inclusivity in a classroom seems obvious, it goes without saying that the environment of a classroom needs to be more inclusive of students of different genders *without* trying to rationalize or normalize the gender of students. When educators attempt to increase the inclusion of a specific group of students, they are also normalizing them and making a different group of students seem deviant. Normalization is not the goal for LGBTQIA students, respect and value are the goals (Bower-Phipps, 2017).

A classroom environment can be a common place where students learn binary gender roles and where their own identities fit into those roles. These persistent binary gender roles are not always made explicit to students (or teachers for that matter) although, they are often silently acknowledged and repeatedly reinforced by students and teachers. When this happens, the environment of a classroom or school slowly changes to one that enforces binary gender norms and leaves little room for acceptance of deviant behavior. This ultimately results in a setting where students and teachers can both fall victim to the consequences of their inability to recognize binary gender bias issues (Andrews & Ridenour, 2006; Servos et al., 2016; Pawlowski et al., 2015). Again, this rigid, binary setting can make LGBTQIA students often feel less safe

(which forces many students to skip class), feel less supported by the school community, and achieve less academically because of skipping class or feeling unsafe (Marx, Roberts, & Nixon, 2017; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009).

**A Place to Learn and Perform.** Research concerning the gender stereotypes present in classrooms showed that the environment in which a student learns in can highly influence *what* they learn and how they form their own identity (Baig, 2014; Lester, Struthers, & Yamanaka, 2017; Stevens & Martell, 2016). Studies have provided insight from classrooms and playgrounds of young children that binary gender roles were often applied but also challenged while children played (Servos, Dewar, Bosacki, & Coplan, 2016; Pawlowski, Ergler, Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, Schipperijn, & Troelsen, 2015). Even at a very young age of five or six years old, young children were already found to be able to recognize binary gender roles that they had previously been exposed to, outside of the classroom. Likewise, young children were also able to demonstrate that they can shape their own understanding of gender from their current environments (Stroeher, 1994; Servos et al., 2016; Blaise, 2009; Pawlowski et al., 2015). At an older age, students were shown to apply or challenge binary gender stereotypes by conforming to their assumed gender roles or standing out as the ‘deviant’ in their classroom (Lester et al., 2017).

While binary gender stereotypes can affect how a student forms their own understanding about gender. Research regarding the gendered stereotypes that follow subjects such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) has shown that these stereotypes can have negative impacts on students who study these subjects (Bieri Buschor, Kappler, Keck Frei, & Berweiger, 2014). For example, a study done by Bieri Buschor et al. (2014) showed that the binary gender stereotypes that appear in STEM classes can have negative influences on female

students. Many students in the study by Bieri Buschor et al. (2014) were found to devalue women who pursued careers in STEM subjects. The devaluing of female students in STEM subjects created a learning environment where female students had to convince their parents and themselves that they *were* valuable to the field of STEM and should continue their studies (Bieri Buschor, Kappler, Keck Frei, & Berweger, 2014).

**Teacher Bias.** Numerous studies provide significant examples of how a teacher's personal biases and beliefs influences how a teacher educates their students (Stevens & Martell, 2016; Baig, 2014; Emilson, Folkesson, & Lindberg, 2016; Valley & Graber, 2017; Roulston & Misawa, 2011). A teacher's personal beliefs regarding binary genders can influence how a student understands binary genders. Either by a teacher's language use or the reinforcement of binary gender roles in their classrooms, particularly in physical education and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematic) classes (Valley and Graber, 2017; Roulston and Misawa, 2011; Kearns et al., 2017; Emilson et al., 2016; Bieri Buschor, Kappler, Keck Frei, & Berweger, 2014). Research by Brickhouse, Lowery, and Schultz (2000) and Stevens and Martell (2016) provide valuable insight as to how a teacher's personal beliefs can be projected onto a student by reinforcing persistent binary gender stereotypes that are already present in their school. It is important to remember that binary gender roles are not always shown to students in a straightforward manner, they often are however, very discrete "lessons" that can occur between other teachers as well (Shu-Ching, 2014).

Current literature describes a demand for adequate training of our educators so that they can combat the use of binary gender stereotypes in their schools (Kearns et al., 2017; Valley and Graber, 2017; Preston, 2016; Marx, Roberts, & Nixon, 2017). By teaching educators how binary

gender stereotypes are created and repeatedly reinforced, it is possible that more teachers would be able to recognize the use of these stereotypes (as inconspicuous as they may seem) and work to remove the influence these rigid binary gender stereotypes have on their students. By doing so, school staff would be able to improve the experiences that LGBTQIA students have in their school by making LGBTQIA students feel safer in their schools with the adoption of anti-bullying policies and making LGBTQIA students feel more supported in their schools with the addition of Gay Straight Alliances (Marx, Roberts, & Nixon, 2017).

It is clear that there is a demand for a change in our school's environment, one where there is inclusivity for both the students *and* teachers (Bower-Phipps, 2017; Lester et al., 2017; Servos et al., 2016). As previously stated in regard to teacher biases, the adequate training of our educators is also necessary to provide an open-minded and accepting culture to our classrooms and educative systems. While there are plenty of studies being conducted in regard to gender stereotype use in education, there is little research that is currently being done that describes the experiences LGBTQIA students actually have with binary gender stereotypes. Because of the gap in research on this topic and specific environment, this study will aim to fill in some of these gaps and answer some key questions. To do so, it is imperative that this study use Queer Theory and Social Identity Theory as the theoretical lenses. Queer Theory stresses "identity fluidity" and is not limited to gay or lesbian identities (Rodriguez, 2012) where as Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals learn their inclusiveness through interactions with their families and peers (Riekie, Aldridge, & Afari, 2017). Besides being learned, membership to particular social groups is often also earned (Parker, 2014).

## **Summary**

In the next chapter the methodology for this particular study will be examined and include a description of the phenomenological research methods that were used. Additionally, a description of the setting where the study took place and the participants who took part in the study will be discussed. Lastly, the methods for gathering and thematically analyzing the data will be discussed in detail.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

In this chapter, the research design and methods used in this study are discussed. First, I describe the overall design and nature of the study, as well as the participants that were involved in this study. Next, I explain how the participants were chosen and how the data were collected and later analyzed.

#### **Research Design**

The research design applied in this study was phenomenological. The goal of phenomenological research is to richly describe a particular phenomenon as it is experienced by a person or group of people (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). In the case of this study, the goal was to describe how LGBTQIA university students experienced binary gender stereotypes during their high school years in order to better understand the impact of those experiences. By utilizing phenomenological research methods in this study, the experiences and phenomenon LGBTQIA university students have had with binary gender stereotypes in high school was authentically described.

#### **Setting and Participants**

The setting of this study was a university in the upper Midwest of the United States. The university was located in a mid-sized city which is home to individuals of diverse economic statuses, ethnicities, genders and ages. The university is a four-year institution that offers a variety of majors and minors, including a LGBTQIA minor. The university is also home to a diverse collective of student associations which included an LGBTQIA student association.

The five participants of this study came from a range of ethnicities, economic backgrounds, genders, and ages. All participants were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-six years old. The LGBTQIA association has approximately fifteen members who meet regularly. None of the participants went to the same high school and all had different high school experiences with binary gender stereotypes. The participants were recruited at one of the LGBTQIA association meetings as well as through their acquaintances. Potential participants were given information regarding the nature and background of the study, as well as an idea of what would be asked of them if they chose to participate in this study.

### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

Data were gathered through five, individual, 90-minute semi-structured interviews with individuals who identified within the LGBTQIA spectrum. Interviews were conducted by the researcher. At the time of the interview, the participants completed the necessary consent forms. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes, enabling themes to be identified in the analysis. Interview questions asked participants to describe their experiences with binary gender stereotypes while they attended high school.

Thematic analysis was adopted in this study. Thematic analysis involves categorizing the data from the interviews into themes. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to discover relationships amongst the data more easily (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Analysis of the interview data began with identifying topics within each individual interview. Redundancy, saliency, duration, and emphasis, as well as content were noted in identifying topics. Next, topics identified within individual interviews were analyzed across interviews to identify patterns among the topics. Lastly, patterns were clustered in terms of content and meaning to form



descriptive themes regarding the LGBTQIA students' experiences with binary gender stereotypes. Three substantial themes were found and will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.

### **Summary**

The study focused on LGBTQIA university students at the University, an urban university in the Upper Midwest of the United States and their experiences of binary gender stereotypes. The study adopted a phenomenological design. Individual interviews with the five participants were analyzed through thematic analysis, revealing three descriptive themes about binary gender stereotype use and its influences in high school. In the chapter that follows, the descriptive themes are discussed in light of the research question that guided the study: how did LGBTQIA university students experience binary gender stereotypes in high school and how did those experiences influence their high school experience.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Results and Discussion**

In this chapter, the results of the study are discussed. First, I describe the themes that emerged in the analysis of the participant interviews in light of the research question. Next, I discuss the relevance of the themes in light of participants' high school experiences with binary gender stereotypes.

#### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to understand how LGBTQIA university students experienced binary gender stereotypes while they attended high school. Data were gathered through five, individual, 90-minute semi-structured interviews with individuals who identified within the LGBTQIA spectrum. From the interviews, three significant themes were found: the presence of gender hierarchies, binary gender stereotypes were learned in high school, and the questioning of students' personhood.

**The presence of gender hierarchies.** It was to be expected that all the participants in this study would have experienced binary gender stereotypes at some point in their high school years. What was unexpected was how the participants made sense of the binary gender stereotypes they experienced. In order to create their own definition of gender and understand where their own gender sat on the social "food chain," gender hierarchies were created. Gender hierarchies were similar to social hierarchies in which a student's "status (or rank) is most frequently defined as priority of access to resources in competitive situations" (Cummins, 2005, p. 3). A gender hierarchy determines the access to resources based on a person's gender. Gender hierarchies, for the participants in this study, determined which high school students had access to various

resources, which in turn allowed them to perform better academically solely based on their gender.

In the participants' experience, male students were at the top of the gender hierarchy because of the present binary gender stereotypes. Also, in the gender hierarchy were female students, who were found to be below males in the gender hierarchy. Lastly, LGBTQIA students were found to be at the bottom of the gender hierarchy. For the participants, the presence of a gender hierarchy based on binary genders influenced how the participants created their own definition of gender, as well as how they understood where their own gender sat on the social "food chain." An example of male students at the top of the gender hierarchy comes from the participants' experiences with school athletics. Male students were perceived as the most athletic gender in comparison to other genders. One participant explained that while they were in high school, they often played on the boys' soccer team. Even though "*[The] girls had a soccer team as well...they weren't as like 'raised up' as the boys' team.*" More specifically, the boys' soccer team was viewed as more important than the girls' team because the gender of the students who participated in the boys' team were male. Another participant described that his high school was required to let female students play football with the male students. However, the male students got to choose which female students got to play football and for how long. "*We'd play football and [the male students would] have to throw it to a girl at least once because they had to, it was part of the rules. But, they would only throw it once... girls can't play football but you have to let them participate, so throw it to them once.*" In being allowed to choose which female student could play and how much she could play, male students were given advantage and power over female students.

The gender hierarchy also provided male students with a higher status or rank amongst their peers, which resulted in male students being bullied far less than their female or LGBTQIA peers. Students who are bullied can experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide. Students who are bullied achieve less academically as they choose to skip school because they feel unsafe and have a diminished connection with their school community (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2018; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008, Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Prairie, 2018). Because male students were bullied the least, in the experiences of the participants, the male students were in turn given more opportunities to perform better academically. For participants in this study, power and advantage along binary gender were explicit in the athletics of their high schools.

Within the gender hierarchy participants experienced in high school, female students were positioned below male students, but higher than students who identified as LGBTQIA. As noted above, female students were given less access to athletic resources than male athletes. One of the participants explained that female students at her high school had a difficult time playing male-dominated sports such as football or basketball. She stated that “...*it’s not spoke of if girls want to play football or basketball or even softball anymore because you get looked down as like a ‘dyke’ if you want to do that.*” This participant used the word “dyke” as a negative or slang term for a lesbian, meaning that any female student who wanted to play male-dominated sports could not be a heterosexual female as this behavior did not fit with the binary gender stereotype for a female. The same participant confided that “*I think a lot of girls lost confidence because they’d be looked at differently if they were [to play a male-dominated sport] like... I want to do it but they don’t offer it for girls and how dare I try out because I just have a vagina, I don’t have*

*enough testosterone to do this.*” Experiences such as these illustrate that for the participants, female students were frequently treated as if they were lesser and not as valuable as their male peers. Although female students were given less athletic resources, they were also found to be bullied far less than their LGBTQIA peers. By being bullied less often, the female students in this study were given more opportunities to perform better academically than LGBTQIA students as, for instance, none of the participants witnessed any of their female peers skipping classes to avoid being bullied. Again, numerous studies have found that students who are bullied achieve less academically as they choose to skip school because they feel unsafe and have a diminished connection with their school community (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2018; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008, Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Prairie, 2018).

Based on the participants’ experiences, the LGBTQIA students at their high schools were on the lowest level of the gender hierarchy. One participant described an incident in which a student at their high school openly identified as non-binary and was often laughed at by other students in the hallway and their gender was not taken seriously by their peers. The participant went on to explain that their peers would not accept the non-binary student’s gender as valid and continued to bully the non-binary student when they continued to identify as non-binary. The participant explained that *“if you weren’t one [gender] or the other...you were weird.”* Similarly, another participant stated that *“people who more overtly didn’t fit into the binary gender stereotypes, [other] people would kind of make fun of them or like, not really accept their identity.”* Studies have shown that students use labels to develop their social identity and understand how the different labels fit together as a whole (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). In

the instances described above, in the participants' experience, LGBTQIA students at their high schools were frequently bullied because of their gender. In the case of this study, the participants saw that in their high schools, students who fit into the binary gender stereotypes that were present were treated with more tolerance and bullied far less than students who did not fit into the present binary gender stereotypes. Students at the participants' high schools who did not fit into the present binary gender stereotypes, such as the participants in this study, were not tolerated as much as their binary peers and therefore, bullied because of their gender.

Another participant described a similar intolerance towards the transgender students at his high school. He stated that some teachers would *“not use [a] student's preferred name or pronouns, especially in front other people”* and that this would makes the classroom environment difficult for the student because the teacher would blatantly ignore a student's preferences in front of the entire class. The teacher disrespected the student transgender and reinforced the gender hierarchy among the students. An unwelcoming classroom environment such as this provides less resources to LGBTQIA students, that influences many LGBTQIA students to perform poorer academically. As discussed earlier in this study, the unfair treatment of LGBTQIA students can lead many LGBTQIA students to skip school because they feel unsafe (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009). GLSEN's 2017 survey for LGBTQIA students found that LGBTQIA students were almost three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than non-LGBTQIA students. Ultimately, LGBTQIA students can potentially have poorer attendance and lower GPAs than their binary peers because LGBTQIA students are found to more frequently skip classes to avoid being bullied (Kosciw et al., 2018; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008).

In regard to their experiences as LGBTQIA in high school, another participant said that more often than not the LGBTQIA students at her high school were quietly dismissed as unimportant because they were neither male nor female. Rather, along the gender hierarchy, LGBTQIA students had the least status. *“Other people will view you differently if you don't fit into those stereotypes, or that subtly without them even realizing, they look down upon you for not fitting into those stereotypes.”* An experience such as this one further provides evidence that the gender hierarchy influenced how the participants developed their own definition of gender. The participants developed their own definition for each gender from viewing and experiencing the binary gender stereotypes present in their high schools. After numerous experiences with binary gender stereotypes and the gender hierarchies in their high school, the participants discovered their individual definitions of the male, female or LGBTQIA gender, as well as where their own gender sat on the social food chain.

### **Learning Binary Gender Stereotypes.**

For the participants in this study, a common place where they further experienced binary gender stereotypes was in their high school classrooms. The content in many of the courses the participants took in high school were replete with binary stereotypes, particularly in sex education or career-oriented classes. From the participants' experiences, it was found that binary gender stereotypes were continually learned throughout high school. Binary gender stereotypes were taught to the participants implicitly and explicitly; such as verbally through interactions with peers or through the omission of genders beyond the male-female binary in the content of their classes.

In the participants' experiences, binary gender stereotypes were implicitly taught through teacher instruction methods and the omission of genders beyond the male-female binary in the content of their classes. A lesson that is implicitly taught to a student is often referred to as hidden curriculum, which is the idea that in the lessons that are taught, there are aspects that unintentionally teach values and perspectives that can perpetuate certain stereotypes (Malewski, 2010). In the case of the participants, aspects of their high school curriculum implicitly reinforced the binary gender stereotypes they had learned throughout their years as a student. From the experiences of one participant, their teachers often let derogatory comments such as "dyke" or "gay" slide, which implicitly taught the participant and their peers that it was okay to call someone a "dyke" (or any other derogatory term) based on a binary gender stereotype. This participant continued, saying that *"kids are not reprimanded enough,"* meaning their peers had not been disciplined by their teachers after a student bullied another student because of their gender. Moreover, another participant described an experience they had with one of their former high school teachers who implicitly taught binary gender stereotypes. *"Some of the teachers I had in high school, you could tell that they very clearly bought into binary gender roles, like they treated the male and females students differently...there were a couple teachers I had in high school who were men who...very subtly, not overtly, were more...condescending to girls."* Even though this teacher did not explicitly say it was okay to treat female students differently, by acting in a condescending manner toward the female students in his classroom, this teacher taught his students that it was okay for female students to be patronized.

Instances of binary gender stereotypes explicitly taught to students often occurred in career education classes. Career education classes were designed to prepare a student for a career



in a specific field; however, in the participants' experience, career education classes often stereotyped which gender should pursue a certain career. One participant explained that experiences with binary gender stereotypes in career education classes resulted in stereotypes for what type of career a male or female should pursue after high school. This participant stated that they had wished their career education teachers had known that women *"can do things more than a medical degree, they can go be a mechanical engineer if they want to. Men don't just have to be in the sport related things [or get] a business degree and if they want to go be a nurse or a cosmetologist they can do that...there's no circle for what one person can do, there's not gender for a career, there's not gender for being who you are."* For this participant, the career education teacher stereotyped their male and female students and taught that a specific career should must be pursued by a specific gender.

Another example of binary gender stereotypes explicitly taught to students was experienced in sex education classes. Several participants stated that in their high schools, they only learned about the male or female gender from their sex education classes. These sex education classes were limiting, as they taught very little about gender and mainly taught about the male or female sex anatomy. As discussed earlier in this study, gender is "radically independent of sex," (Butler, 1990, p. 9). Many of participants felt strongly that gender identities, especially identities besides male or female, should have been taught in sex education. Furthermore, the omission of gender (particularly genders beyond male and female) from the curriculum experienced by the participants was an example of the implicit teaching of binary gender stereotypes. Several participants explained in their interviews that *"it would have been awesome if [they] could have learned about other genders in high school."* A few participants

further explained that learning about gender identities, other than male or female, could have been beneficial for students who already knew that they did not fit into the male or female binary gender stereotype. *“I think it’s important to talk about gender as more than a binary for people who don’t know that they are going through stuff like that...just ‘cause it’s not talked about, not...educated about.”* Similarly, another participant stated that learning about gender identities in sex education classes could bring awareness to other genders their peers may not know about. *“There should be some unit, maybe in health class or something, where they talk about gender identities and explain that stuff to people because I never had anything like that and I think a lot of people are just not aware of it.”* By omitting the discussion of gender identity from their curriculum, the participants’ teachers had taught the participants that the binary gender stereotypes they had learned from their peers or elsewhere were valid and did not need to be corrected by teachers. Ultimately, the implicit and explicit teaching of binary gender stereotypes influenced the participants’ by limiting and controlling their knowledge of gender, especially genders other than male or female. This controlled knowledge hindered the participants’ ability to truly understand themselves and their peers in high school, in terms of gender identity.

**The Questioning of students’ personhood.** As a result of the continual presence of binary gender stereotypes in their high school, all the participants explained that their personhood was often questioned by their peers. Personhood refers to the unique and distinct individual identity of a person (Fowler, 2006). For this study, the questioning of students’ personhood therefore refers to the investigation of a student’s individuality or their “state of being a person” (Fowler, 2006, p.4). In the context of this study, a student’s personhood also includes their gender identity. In the participants’ experiences, it was common for their peers to question a student’s

gender by comparing them to the binary gender stereotypes present at their high school. If a student was found by their peers to not fit into a binary gender stereotype, their personhood and individual identity was questioned. Analysis of the data found that the students at the participants' high school most commonly questioned the personhood of LGBTQIA students. From the interviews, several participants explained that gender of LGBTQIA and non-binary students was often questioned and mocked. As one participant said, *"I knew two people in high school who identified as non-binary and...people were pretty rude about that...there was one student who was gender fluid and people would just like laugh about that"*. Similarly, another participant stated that at her high school, *"...not a lot of people were open about [being non-binary] because...too many people who would be like 'you're an idiot'."* The experiences of the participants illustrate that the personhood of LGBTQIA and non-binary students was often questioned by their binary peers. Binary gender stereotypes played a role in the scrutiny of LGBTQIA and non-binary students due to the limiting nature of the stereotypes. One participant explained that at her high school, *"...men are expected to be the more assertive...more in charge.... Women in general, are expected to be more submissive and passive."* Binary gender stereotypes such as the ones described, influenced how all the participants placed value on gender. Moreover, binary gender stereotypes provided a space for the participants to question the personhood and gender of their peers.

## **Discussion**

To summarize, the analysis revealed that throughout the participants' high school years, they all experienced binary gender stereotypes in one form or another. From analyzing the data, three themes were found: the presence of gender hierarchies, binary gender stereotypes were

learned in high school, and the questioning of students' personhood. As discussed earlier, students frequently use labels to develop their social identity as a means to understand how the different labels fit together as a whole (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). Participants in this study were found to utilize binary gender stereotypes as a means to label themselves and their peers to understand which "whole" or social group they belonged. Furthermore, creating a gender hierarchy that determined which high school students would have access to various resources, opportunities to perform better academically, solely based on a student's gender. Male students were found to be at the top of the gender hierarchy and had more opportunities to perform better academically as male students were bullied less often than their female or LGBTQIA peers. Female students were below male students on the gender hierarchy, followed by LGBTQIA students at the bottom of the gender hierarchy. Again, this social "food chain" determined which students would have access to resources such as sports, who would have more opportunities to perform better academically.

For many LGBTQIA students, the binary gender stereotypes that enforced the gender hierarchy eventually limited their ability to be seen as part of the desired social group, ultimately outing them as an "other." As stated earlier, students who are viewed as being "out" may become victimized, or bullied by their peers (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009). Students who are bullied because of their gender can experience negative academic outcomes such as lower GPAs, poor academic success and poor attendance as many students choose to skip school because they feel unsafe or unwelcome on their school (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2018; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008).

As illustrated through the experiences of the participants in this study, the male-female binary definition of gender was the persistent meaning of gender in the participants' high school experiences. Binary gender stereotypes permeated every aspect of the participants' experiences in high school, including their social life, access to resources and experiences, and in their very personhood. As described earlier, the structure of a high school's curriculum can also preserve binary gender stereotypes by omitting the discussion of other gender identities. Based on the insights of this study, educators and administrators should consider adopting a mentality that does not assume a student's gender is derivative of another. Female students should not be thought of as derivative of male students and LGBTQIA students should not be thought of as derivative of female students. Adopting a mentality that allows each student to be considered on an individual basis can ultimately improve the experiences and academic success of our high school students.

### **Summary**

The analysis revealed that LGBTQIA participants experienced binary gender stereotypes while they were in high school through various interactions with high school sports teams, dating, and interaction with their peers. Three themes from the data were discovered: the presence of gender hierarchies, binary gender stereotypes were learned in high school, and the questioning of students' personhood. In the chapter that follows, the significant findings and their implications to the field of education will be discussed. Additionally, the next chapter will include the limitations for this study and my recommendations for future research regarding the topic of binary gender stereotypes in educational settings.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In this chapter, I address the overall findings that emerged from the analysis of the participant interviews and explain the importance of these findings in the field of education. I next discuss my recommendations for future research about binary gender stereotypes in educational settings, as well as consider the limitations of the present study.

### **Results and Implications**

A significant finding in this study was that the majority of the participants expressed experienced binary gender stereotypes across every aspect of their high school experience. An implication of the study and something expressed by the participants was a desire for teachers to educate their students about gender identities, specifically non-binary gender identities. Some participants explained that while they were in high school, they “*did not have the vocabulary*” or knowledge about non-binary genders to truly understand themselves or others. Several participants suggested that sex education teachers could include a section dedicated to non-binary genders. Participants felt that students who identified as non-binary would feel more welcome at their school because their peers would be more accepting of non-binary students and less likely to bully them. The addition of gender identities into a school’s curriculum has the potential to change the influence gender hierarchies have on a school’s climate. If gender identities (particularly non-binary identities) were taught in high school sex education classes, students who identified as these genders may feel more welcome and have more access to resources at their high school because they are bullied less. The themes that emerged in the analysis are parallel to findings from several other studies that show there is currently a demand

for educators to teach about gender identities, as well as a demand for Gay Straight Alliances to be established at more high schools (Kearns et al., 2017; Valley and Graber, 2017; Preston, 2016; Marx, Roberts, & Nixon, 2017). By teaching about gender identities and instituting more Gay Straight Alliances in high schools, the experiences that LGBTQIA students might improve and LGBTQIA students might feel safer and more supported.

All of the participants in this study defined gender as being fluid and that gender can change from person to person over time. Butlers (1990) noted that gender is “radically independent of sex” (p. 9). Richards et al. (2016) asserted that a person’s gender can change over time or it can be a non-binary gender, such as agender or third gender. For the participants in this study, their experiences with binary gender in high school heightened their awareness of themselves. For some participants, that awareness emerged as they realized that they were not defined by the male-female gender binary.

### **Recommendations**

One recommendation stemming from this study is for future research to encourage educators to continue professional development to gain a greater awareness and sensitivity toward gender and in particular, the deeply embedded binary gender stereotypes that dominate a school’s environment. Additionally, another recommendation for future research would be to study adults who identify as LGBTQIA from different generations in order to investigate the differences in their experiences of gender in high school. Such a comparison could reveal whether school climate or curriculum have been influenced by a greater social understanding of genderedness. This new research idea would interview several more participants of various ages, economic statuses, locations, and ethnicities. I believe that this revised research project could

provide a rich and telling narrative of how students through the years have been influenced by binary gender stereotypes in high schools across the United States.

### **Limitations**

A limitation for this study was that most of the participants were students from the same institution. Having a majority of the participants be students who attended the same institution could have potentially shaped their understanding of gender and binary gender stereotypes in similar way. It is important to note, however, that all the participants had different high school experiences and did not attend the same high school. A second limitation for this study was the number of students that participated. With a small number of students who choose to participate in this study, this could have potentially limited the diversity and number of findings.

### **Summary**

In summary, this study found that the LGBTQIA participants experienced binary gender stereotypes significantly in high school through the social and academic structure of schooling. The presence of gender hierarchies, the structure of a high school's curriculum, and the questioning of students' personhood all influenced how the participants experienced binary gender stereotypes while they attended high school. Ultimately, gender hierarchies present at the participants' high schools led to the participants' who identified as LGBTQIA students who did not fit into the stereotype for their binary gender. It is my hope that this research will influence educators so that we can change the experiences LGBTQIA students have in high school and provide a more welcoming and inclusive climate for our future students to succeed in.



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# Appendix I

## IRB Approval Letter

### UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

*Twin Cities Campus*

*Human Research Protection Program  
Office of the Vice President for Research*

*Room 350-2  
McNamara Alumni Center  
200 Oak Street S.E.  
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#### APPROVAL OF NEW STUDY

March 29, 2019

Lynn Brice

218-340-2618  
[lbrice@umn.edu](mailto:lbrice@umn.edu)

Dear Lynn Brice:

On 3/21/2019, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Learning Gender: A Exploration of Gender Stereotypes in American High Schools
Investigator:	Lynn Brice
IRB ID:	STUDY00006057
Sponsored Funding:	None
Grant ID/Con Number:	None
Internal UMN Funding:	None
Fund Management Outside University:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed with this Submission:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• consent form, Category: Consent Form;</li><li>• Margaret Peters IRB, Category: IRB Protocol;</li><li>• interview questions, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li><li>• meeting handout, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li><li>• meeting script, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li></ul>

The IRB determined that the criteria for approval have been met and that this study involves No greater than minimal risk

**Driven to Discover<sup>SM</sup>**

This study was approved under Expedited Category:

- (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The IRB approved the study from 3/28/2019 to inclusive. You will be sent a reminder from ETHOS to submit a Continuing Review submission for this study. You must submit your Continuing Review no later than 30 days prior to the last day of approval in order for your study to be reviewed and approved for another Continuing Review period. If Continuing Review approval is not granted before , approval of this protocol expires immediately after that date.

You must also submit a Modification in ETHOS for review and approval prior to making any changes to this study.

If consent forms or recruitment materials were approved, those are located under the Final column in the Documents tab in the ETHOS study workspace.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the [HRPP Toolkit Library](#) on the IRB website.

For grant certification purposes, you will need the approval and last day of approval dates listed above and the Assurance of Compliance number which is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA00004003).

Sincerely,

Jeffery P Perkey, CIP, MLS  
IRB Analyst

We value feedback from the research community and would like to hear about your experience. The link below will take you to a brief survey that will take a minute or two to complete. The questions are basic, but your responses will help us better understand what we are doing well and areas that may require improvement. Thank you in advance for completing the survey.

Even if you have provided feedback in the past, we want and welcome your evaluation.

<http://z.umn.edu/irbsurvey>

## **Appendix II**

### **Interview Questions**

1. In high school, did you find that self-identifying your gender was an easy or difficult thing to do?
2. Many people think of gender in terms of male or female. How do you define gender?
3. When you think back to high school, do you recall experiencing gender binaries such as male and female?
  - a. Can you think of a specific example where such binaries stood out to you?
4. Looking back on your experiences, how did the gender binary stereotypes you experienced impact how you saw yourself in high school?
5. When you look back on your high school experiences, what do you think is most challenging about persistent binary gender for those who do not identify as male or female?
6. What is something you would tell educators in high school to consider regarding gender binary stereotypes and its impact on students?